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Viewing cable 09TELAVIV2502, 40TH JPMG: NEA REGIONAL DISCUSSION (PART 3 OF 4)

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09TELAVIV2502	2009-11-18 14:34	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET	Embassy Tel Aviv

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SUBJECT: 40TH JPMG: NEA REGIONAL DISCUSSION (PART 3 OF 4)

Classified By: A/DCM Marc Sievers, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

11. (S) Summary: As part of the 40th Joint Political Military Group (JPMG), U.S. and GOI counterparts discussed security issues in the Near East region. GOI officials expressed support for the P5 plus 1 engagement process with Iran, but doubted the process would lead to any change in Iranian behavior -- Iran will use the engagement process as an

opportunity to continue its pursuit of a nuclear weapon. Assistant Secretary for Political Military Affairs Andrew Shapiro stressed that engagement with Tehran was not "open ended"; the United States is preparing sanctions in the event engagement does not prove successful. GOI interlocutors continued to express concerns regarding U.S. support of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF); U.S. participants reiterated U.S. support of the LAF as a counterweight to Hizballah. A/S Shapiro noted NEA, with PM participation and support, plans to brief the GOI on the U.S. policy regarding Lebanon in the near future. In a continuation from the JPMG Executive Session, GOI interlocutors made the argument that U.S. arms transfers in the region could potentially arm future enemies of Israel. GOI officials expressed frustration over the Goldstone Report; U.S. officials advocated sharing lessons learned regarding confronting terrorists in civilian-populated areas. GOI officials noted improved counter-smuggling efforts from Egypt regarding arms transfers to Gaza via the Sinai. However, they argued that Egypt can and should do more to prevent the flow of arms. U.S. delegation members also briefed on U.S. policy in Iraq, and expressed concerns about the current situation in Yemen. This is the third of four cables (septels) reporting on the JPMG. End summary.

12. (SBU) Main Israeli Participants:

- Brigadier General (res) Pinchas Buchris, MOD Director General
- Major General (ret) Amos Gilad, MOD Political-Military Chief
- Brigadier General Ronen Dan, acting Israeli Defense Attache to the United States
- Gad Dovev, Director, MOD Mission, New York
- Alon Bar, MFA Deputy Director General for Strategic Affairs
- COL Shimon Arad, IDF J5
- Rami Yungman, MOD Political-Military Bureau
- Schmuuel Royter, Assistant to the MOD Director General

Main U.S. Participants:

- Andrew Shapiro, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs
- James Hursch, Director, DTSA
- Dr. Colin Kahl, International Security Affairs, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
- Brigadier General Jefforey Smith, Joint Staff
- Beth McCormick, Deputy Director, DSCA
- Prem Kumar, Director for Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian and Jordanian Affairs, NSC
- Tom Goldberger, Director for Israel and Palestinian Affairs, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs
- COL Richard Burgess, Defense Attache, U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv
- Robert Maggi, PM Coordinator for Counter Piracy
- Kevin Maloney, Licensing Director, PM/DTCL

Plenary -----

13. (S) MOD Director General Pinchas Buchris began the plenary, stating this was "perhaps the most important JPMG to date." He pointed to the threat of a nuclear Iran, and expressed hope that U.S. leadership will find a way to stop Iran. Otherwise, a nuclear-armed Iran will "impact the stability of the world," Buchris said. A/S Shapiro described this 40th JPMG as a key forum and the primary mechanism in the political-military dialogue between the United States and Israel. He said the United States wants to "re-energize" the JPMG, with the goal to "bring back strategic elements" into the discussion. A/S Shapiro highlighted the importance of mutual understanding and transparent dialogue.

Iran -----

14. (S) MOD Political-Military Director Amos Gilad presented a strategic overview. He began with Iran, reciting President Obama's statement made during a visit to Israel prior to

becoming president that the United States would not tolerate a nuclear Iran. Gilad said Israel concurs, and described current dialogue with Iran as the "most sensitive stage" and Iran's "last chance." He said Iran remains determined to

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reach the "nuclear option," which he described as "intolerable." He quoted former President and Ahmadinejad opponent Rafsanjani as saying Iran "only needs one bomb for Israel," implying that Iran will continue to threaten Israel regardless of its leadership.

15. (S) A/S Shapiro noted that the United States shares Israel's concerns that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons program. He said that the United States is beginning with engagement, but at the same time is preparing tougher measures should engagement fail. A/S Shapiro stressed that engagement was not "open ended" -- the United States needs to see concrete steps and tangible results from the P5 1 talks. He noted concerns over the Qom facility; if Iran does not respond to engagement, then the United States will move toward stronger steps such as sanctions. DASD Kahl reiterated that it is not our intention to allow Iran to "run out the clock," and noted that engagement also serves to build international consensus on sanctions. MFA Deputy Director for Strategic Affairs Alon Bar argued that the United States must present a clearer message to the Europeans on what is expected of them regarding sanctions.

16. (S) A representative from Mossad said Tehran understands that by reacting positively to engagement, Iran can continue to "play for time" and avoid sanctions while pursuing its strategic objective to obtain a military nuclear capability. From Mossad's perspective, there is no reason to believe Iran will do anything but use negotiations to stall for time so that by 2010-2011, Iran will have the technological capability to build a nuclear weapon -- essentially reducing the question of weaponizing to a political decision. Mossad said Iran's main crisis is in the political sphere -- the current regime is weaker than prior to the elections, but does not face significant risk as its security apparatus remains loyal, while the opposition lacks a charismatic leader. The goal of the regime, therefore, is to calm down the domestic political environment -- Khamenei realizes the frustration demonstrated following the elections has not disappeared. BG Smith asked if Khamenei's death might change the political landscape; Mossad noted no information to suggest a change in Khamenei's health, while those surrounding him appear more loyal than ever.

17. (S) Mossad believes Iran wants to become a regional hegemon, and is dictating its agenda by using Hamas and Hizballah as force multipliers. In that respect, Iran is very creative in finding ways to transfer weapons systems to its proxies. Mossad said Tehran also understands the effort to split Syria from Iran's influence, and is working hard to deepen its relationship with Syria as a result. DASD Kahl argued that Iran is weaker regionally today than in recent years. He noted progress in Iraq, the results of the recent Lebanese elections, and outreach to Syria as signs of a weaker Iran. DASD Kahl also noted increased U.S. credibility in the Muslim world, while the crackdown following the Iranian elections exposed the current regime as brutal to the region and in Europe.

Hizballah/Lebanon/Syria

18. (S) Gilad addressed threats posed by "Hizballahstan" and "Hamastan," noting that Hizballah/Hamas-Syria-Iran cooperation has strengthened. He noted that rockets from Lebanon can now cover the entire territory of Israel, while ballistic missiles -- although not new -- remain Israel's most serious threat with adversaries having the capability to target Israeli citizens and major cities. IDF J5 Col Shimon Arad noted four main trends in Lebanon: 1) internal political

deadlock since the elections; 2) Hizballah's growing military capabilities; 3) Lebanon as a volatile military arena; and 4) Lebanon's susceptibility to outside influences, including Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. He recommended improved US.-Israel coordination, and called for an exchange of views. Arad also recommended creating Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) deconfliction measures, demanding improved LAF performance, and exerting greater pressure on Syria and smuggling. Finally, he called for sanctions on the Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC), trilateral meetings with the Lebanese and UNIFIL to deter Hizballah, and bolstering UNIFIL by extending Gen. Graziano's tour for an additional six months.

¶9. (S) A/S Shapiro acknowledged the GOI's desire for specifics regarding U.S. policy on Lebanon, and hoped to invite GOI representatives to Washington in the near future for a full brief led by NEA, with PM participation and support. He cited the need to provide an alternative to Hizballah, which explains U.S. goals to strengthen the LAF as a counterweight. DASD Kahl argued that any LAF cooperation

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with Hizballah is pragmatic given the LAF's current weakness. He noted that U.S. assistance has been temporarily put on hold since there is still no Lebanese government. Kahl also argued that prospects for better relations with Damascus depend on Syrian desires for better relations with the United States and the return of the Golan Heights. Arad argued that more must be done to weaken radicals and cease smuggling. Gilad said the GOI cannot envision a government in Lebanon without Hizballah, and said the LAF will come to the defense of Hizballah if attacked by Israel -- thus, a strengthened LAF hurts Israel.

QME

¶10. (S) Turning to U.S. regional arms transfers, Gilad suggested Qualitative Military Edge (QME) as a "codename" for potential threats against Israel. Israel currently enjoys peace with regimes in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates -- but the future is uncertain, and each of these regimes faces the potential for change, he argued. U.S. weapons -- "the best in the world" -- level the playing field by reducing the need for training -- and could ultimately aid a future enemy of Israel, Gilad said. A/S Shapiro stressed the importance of transparency -- while there may be differences between Israel and the United States in terms of a regional assessment, the key is to ensure that there are no surprises, he said.

Peace Process

¶11. (S) Gilad described the Middle East peace process as a "pillar" of Israeli security. He quoted PM Netanyahu and President Peres that Israel remains sincerely committed to peace. Gilad noted however, that the re-launching of negotiations is complicated by the split in Palestinian leadership. He said a weak and corrupt PA had lost Gaza despite Israeli warnings. Gilad said 2010 will prove pivotal with Palestinian elections looming and Egyptian mediation efforts to broker reconciliation between Hamas and the PA having failed. That said, he noted that Israeli-PA security and economic cooperation in the West Bank continues to improve as Jenin and Nablus flourish, and described Palestinian security forces as the "good guys." NEA/IPA Director Tom Goldberger said Special Envoy Sen. Mitchell continues his mission, and noted that Egyptian reconciliation efforts were meant to strengthen the PA, not weaken it.

Goldstone Report

¶12. (S) Gilad addressed Israel's immediate neighbors within the context of the Goldstone Report. He said Israel has

checked "all the details" of the report, and have concluded that the report's accusations are "baseless." Buchris said the report sets a bad precedent for countries trying to protect its citizens from terrorists; he noted 300,000 phone calls from the IDF to houses in Gaza ahead of strikes in the effort to prevent civilian casualties -- "no other country has taken such steps," Buchris argued. A/S Shapiro highlighted strong U.S. opposition to the report's referral to the UN Security Council, noting the report's biased mandate.

¶13. (S) Gilad said Israel only entered Gaza after Hamas violated the ceasefire or "tahdiya," which many Israelis felt was "humiliating" and left Defense Minister Barak open to criticism. Gilad characterized Operation Cast Lead as a success that accounted for humanitarian issues; the IDF showed restraint in the operation because Israel did not want to re-occupy Gaza. DASD Kahl advocated sharing perspectives and lessons learned on strategic communication to more effectively confront terrorists in civilian-populated areas. NSC Director for Israel and Palestinian Affairs Prem Kumar noted continued UNSC interest in the Goldstone Report, and asked Israel to inform the United States on any additional efforts or investigations the GOI was taking to help deflect any further damage from the report.

Egypt/Counter-Smuggling

¶14. (S) Gilad said Israel was frustrated by its Arab neighbors -- including specifically Egypt -- for supporting the Goldstone Report, which complicates the peace process. Israel continues to benefit from good security cooperation with Jordan, he said. Gilad argued that Egypt could stop smuggling into Gaza "completely," and questioned whether Egypt should be judged by its efforts or results. Gilad

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stressed the latter, and argued Egypt can do more on counter-smuggling. Finally, he noted Israeli concerns that Egypt continues to prepare for a potential future military confrontation with Israel, while no Egyptian military officers visit Israel.

¶15. (S) A/S Shapiro outlined U.S. military assistance to strengthen Egyptian border security, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping and civil defense efforts. He said the United States is working with Egypt to improve regional security efforts, such as counter-smuggling. Regarding the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, A/S Shapiro stressed efforts to improve energy security and counter-terrorism, while bolstering the capabilities of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the face of the Iranian threat. Finally, he noted U.S. withdrawal from the Anatolian Eagle exercise following the Turkish decision to suspend the IDF's participation. A/S Shapiro said the United States has been delivering the message that Turkey must improve its relationship with Israel.

¶16. (S) PM Counter-Piracy Coordinator Maggi briefed on the counter smuggling technical discussion meeting (septel). He cited the importance of working with Israel's neighbors -- including especially Egypt and Turkey -- to prevent Iranian weapons from entering Gaza. Maggi said more pressure should be applied in the EU and UN to gain more latitude -- and possibly further action from the EU. He said tracking cash flows, and increasing prosecutions and incarcerations were important, with the ultimate goal of increasing cooperation and momentum. Goldberger said Egypt sees Hamas as a national security threat, and added that Egypt had closed 200 tunnels since the beginning of 2009.

¶17. (S) Goldberger noted Egyptian domestic political sensitivities, and questioned whether more commercial and humanitarian goods could be allowed through the Gaza border crossings. Gilad strongly stated that there were no limits

on commercial goods through the border crossings. Goldberger asked about construction materiel like cement; Gilad said the GOI would not allow Hamas to build bunkers -- goods such as cement or iron would not be allowed because of their military applications. He also argued that smuggling is a lucrative business for all involved, including the Egyptian government, and said the best way to stop the smuggling was to increase arrests and incarcerations. Goldberger mentioned U.S. economic and development assistance efforts in Sinai. He noted that most requests to third countries to deny arms transfer overflights are based on Israeli intelligence; additional information/intelligence from the GOI would ensure greater cooperation. Bar raised prosecuting shipping companies complicit in arms transfers to Gaza; A/S Shapiro said he would take that back to Washington for further consideration.

Iraq/Yemen

¶18. (S) On Iraq, DASD Kahl noted there are currently 125,000 U.S. soldiers in Iraq, which will be reduced to 50,000 soldiers by September 1, 2010 with complete U.S. troop withdrawal by the end of 2011. He noted the U.S. goal of establishing a long-term strategic relationship with a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq. A/S Shapiro and DASD Kahl briefed the GOI on U.S. efforts to assist the Iraqi military to complete its counterinsurgency force, transition the military to a force that can defend its borders, and align the Iraqi military more closely to the United States.

¶19. (S) DASD Kahl pointed to the growing threat (al Qaida, al Houthi insurgency, and southern secessionists) in Yemen. He said the United States is attempting to prevent Yemen from heading toward an "Afghanistan-type scenario" with general lawlessness and increased ungoverned spaces. BG Smith noted that al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continues to fester in North and sub-Saharan Africa. He said Egypt is actively involved in countering AQIM with 3,800 soldiers in Sudan -- this should be encouraged and expanded.

¶20. (U) A/S Shapiro has cleared on this cable.

CUNNINGHAM